Identifying and Developing Soft Skills for Post-Secondary Success

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Disclosure Statement

- Nancy Eberhardt, employed at D125 Stevenson High School
  - no relevant financial or nonfinancial relationships to disclose.

- Sharon Foster, employed at St Xavier University, Adjunct
  - no relevant financial relationship to disclose
  - relevant nonfinancial relationship to disclose: previously served as President of ISHA (2011-12). Did not receive compensation for this role

- Ellen Wiczer, employed at D102 Aptakisic Jr High School
  - no relevant financial or nonfinancial relationships to disclose.
Learning Outcomes

Participants will be able to:

1. Discuss soft skills and their importance in preparing students for post secondary success

2. Link students’ performance and transition goals to the soft skills needed in the work place

3. Discuss ways that soft skills can be represented in an IEP
I see you did well in school, but what real-world skills do you have?

Tests. I can take tests.
What are soft skills?

- Soft skills are non-technical skills that help people get a job and keep a job.
- Soft skills are not generally skill specific and make it more difficult to teach and measure.
- Soft skills are sometimes referred to as “people skills”.
What are Soft Skills?

- U.S. Department of Labor, identified six major areas for teaching soft skills in a curriculum developed in 2012:
  - communication,
  - enthusiasm and attitude
  - teamwork
  - networking
  - problem solving and critical thinking
  - professionalism

http://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/
Soft Skills Composite
What are soft skills?

- **Communication** is often the most highly ranked soft skill identified by potential employers.

- Other highly valued soft skills:
  - Professionalism
  - Problem Solving, Decision Making and Critical Thinking
  - Teamwork
  - Enthusiasm and Attitude
  - Adaptability
  - Confidence

These traits are more important than technical skills because employees are unable or unwilling to teach and/or remediate soft skills.
Hard vs Soft Skills ~ Examples

Hard Skills:
- Calculations
- Computer programming
- Speaking a foreign language
- Completing a cosmetology certificate or any other certificate or degree program
- Driving a car
- Being a good writer
- Knowing how to use tools

Soft Skills:
- Having good manners
- Taking initiative
- Time management
- Getting along with people
- Adaptability/Flexibility
- Integrity
- Being able to ask for help at the appropriate time
- Problem Solving
- … and many, many more
Hard Skills vs Soft Skills: Examples:

- Baseball player
  - Hard skills = Hitting the ball, catching the ball, running the bases
  - Soft skill = Accepting the umpire’s decision

- Surgeon
  - Hard skills = Good eye hand coordination, knowledge of anatomy, precision at “cutting”
  - Soft skill = Speaking to the patient in a caring manner, aka “good bedside manner”

- Speech-language pathologist
  - Hard skills = Report writing, knowledge of subject area, ability to evaluate clients
  - Soft skill = Collaborating with team members
Why talk about soft skills?

- Post high school reality:
  - Students need to be prepared for competitive employment
  - Employees need to possess hard and soft skills
  - SLPs, Job Coaches, Parents and Teachers won’t be there to assist past a certain point
27 year old male employee with Asperger’s
~had expert programming skills
Manager/employer had been coached on some considerations:
~how to facilitate employee’s participation at Team meetings
~how to help employee deal with lunch time routines plus other ways to help him feel more comfortable at work
Employee left job after four months of his six month contract
Real World Issues with Working

Hard Skills vs Soft Skills

- Expert programmer = hard skill
- Environmental modifications = understanding
  manager/employer = employee had success at meetings, lunch
- Quit bc did not want to write documentation, a necessary but tedious part of writing code (programming)
- Employee struggled with soft skills of: Adaptability and Attitude
- Back in HS, student was waived/accommodated to not have to do tedious work he could prove he knew
- This accommodation did not help him build the skill for tolerating a task needed for the type of work he wanted and was highly capable of doing
SLP role in teaching soft skills

- Soft skills = the language of employers (similar to some aspects of pragmatic language)
- Past practice assumed soft skills were intuitive and not learned; therefore, not taught
- Soft skills, though not easy to teach, can be improved, and awareness about those skills can be taught
- Navigating our society, understanding the nuances of language and communicating, affect employability for getting hired and retaining employment
- We as SLPs may work directly with our students on these skills.
SLP role in teaching soft skills

Most students with language issues, even those with good social skills/pragmatics, need assistance with developing soft skills

Examples:
- Constructing email asking teachers for assistance
- Problem solving difficult peer challenges

Students with pragmatic and social language issues, as well as those students with executive function issues, have even more difficulty with soft skills
SLP role: Are our ducks in a row?

Our students struggle with:

- Idioms and figurative language
- Multiple meaning words
- Nuances of language such as tone, inflection, sarcasm
- Ambiguous language
- Body Language
- So many “roads” lead to miscommunication
Road to confusion? SLPs can help!

Miscommunication easily leads to confusion = poor job (or school) performance

Communication and other areas are essential soft skills

Our students need explicit instruction and practice in order to improve.

SLPs can provide support and strategies for teaching soft skills.
Take time to examine

- Our role
  - What we offer
  - Where our time is well spent

- Our work
  - With students,
  - With IEP teams,
  - With families

- Our expectations
  - For ourselves
  - For our students
The role of the SLP

- soft skills
- curricular concepts
- vocabulary
- Syntax
- comprehension
- expression
- accommodation
A successful coach

- has a vision for the future
- sets expectations
- knows the plan and communicates it
A Unique Viewpoint

The coach can see and interpret the actions and motivations of others on the field of play.
Success isn’t magic . . .

- Make seemingly invisible attributes visible to the student
- What do soft skills look like on the job?
- What does a boss see when he observes someone with a good attitude?
Good Communicator

- Workplace-appropriate language
- Report when done
- Report problems
- Ask questions
- Make suggestions
- Explain clearly
- Use good manners
- Be pleasant with coworkers
Professionalism

- Do the work that the employer expects
- Shift attention when needed
- Use appropriate speaking styles with customers or clients
- Maintain appropriate working speed and accuracy rate
- Maintain hygiene and dress standards
Teamwork

- Make suggestions
- Listen to others
- Do not criticize
- Accept decision of team and implement it
- Report progress or problems to others in group
- Do your assigned portion of project
Decision-Making

- Follow rules and procedures
- Adhere to safety procedures
- Stay out of trouble
- Know when to ask a question and when to work independently
Good Attitude and Enthusiasm

- Do not grumble at work
- Manage deadlines
- Use coping skills to manage stress (no melt downs)
- Maintain workplace manners
- Accept and implement corrections and suggestions
- Be interested in training and further education or responsibilities
Adaptability

- Change from one task to another when directed to do so
- Delay a break
- Step forward to help during busy times
- Do non-favorite tasks because they need to be completed
- Do the work the employer needs in the way that the employer needs it to be done
- Vary work pace as necessary
Confidence

- Perform task with high level of accuracy
- Continue to build knowledge base
- Work independently when appropriate
- Ask questions when appropriate
High School Skills Through the Eyes of Employers: Student 1

Behavior

- Used double to triple time for tests and quizzes
- Could not respond to questions correctly if not using FM system

Soft Skill Deficit

- Working speed/adaptability
- Communication
High School Skills Through the Eyes of Employers: Student 2

Behavior
- Criticized other students during discussion
- Openly Critical of teachers and other students
- Did not use time in class for work
- Completed only 1/3 of homework in math

Soft Skill deficit
- Communication
- Attitude
- Professionalism
High School Skills Through the Eyes of Employers: Student 3

Behavior
- Difficulty shifting attention
- Critical of interruptions
- Depended on external supports for coping

Soft Skill Deficit
- Adaptability
- Attitude
- Adaptability
Gradually transfer responsibility to the student

Our work with high school juniors should look different than our work with freshmen.
Soft Skills and the IEP

How do soft skills inform the IEP process?
Goals vs. Accommodations
Students & Parents Need to Know:

- Adolescence is a time of disappearing supports
  - Curricular and school day realities change the structure of supports in junior high/high school
  - After high school, generally no one will scaffold the tasks

- Adolescents need to internalize strategies
  - Need to apply the necessary skills at the right time in an appropriate sequence
  - Need to have strategies available for when SLP is not around
Goals vs. Accommodations
Students & Parents Need to Know:

- Obstacles faced can provide opportunities:
  - To display adaptability
  - To develop problem solving skills
  - To practice decision making
  - To fine-tune attitude
Goals vs. Accommodations
Discussion with Students & Parents

Analyze target activities:

- What part can the student do successfully?
  - Document in PLAAFP (Present Level of Academic And Functional Performance)

- What part should the student work on as a goal area?
  - Teach skills as behaviors, strategies, and processes

- What part needs to be accommodated while the student works on current goals or prepares for future goals?
Incorporate into Goal/Tx?

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.8.5 Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

http://www.corestandards.org/
Incorporate into Goal/Tx?

- **SEL 3B:** Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations.
  - **3B.2a.** Identify and apply the steps of systematic decision making.
  
- **3B.3a.** Analyze how decision-making skills improve study habits and academic performance.

- **3B.4a.** Evaluate personal abilities to gather information, generate alternatives, and anticipate the consequences of decisions.

- **3B.5a.** Analyze how present decision making affects college and career choices.

Illinois Learning Standards: www.isbe.net/ils/social_emotional/standards
Goals vs. Accommodations
Discussion with Students & Parents

Help students and parents see the big picture:

- Accommodations/modifications are part of a continuum
  - Discuss the accommodations after it is used
    - Why was it helpful/not helpful?

- There are both positive and negative effects of accommodations/modifications
  - Discuss possible adjustments based on both past experience and future goals

- Document accommodations/modifications for future transitions
Transitions

Develop measurable goals that are focused on the postsecondary world:

- Federal mandate for youth age 16
  - Mandated for age 14.5 in Illinois

- Must include measurable postsecondary goals based on appropriate transition assessments

- Must include description of transition services, including courses of study needed to help students reach their goals

- Postsecondary assistance tied to the identifying label
Begin with the End in Mind

- Employers value soft skills
  - Soft skills are not represented in any content area

- Success is more than academic talent
  - IDEA requires identification of factors needed to meet transition goals
  - School years lay the foundation for the transition to work and/or further education
Begin with the End in Mind

- Integrate knowledge about soft skills into our thinking and our direct work with students
  - If the behavior impedes success, do we need to talk about it/help remediate the difficulties?

- Develop awareness of individuality
  - Learn how one performs best. Learn possible strategies for improving performance
  - Experiencing both success and failure help develop understanding of assets and limitations

- Talk with your IEP teams about incorporating soft-skill dialogue into the IEP meetings

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”

William Butler Yeats
References


References


